

## AN ERA OF PERSISTENT CONFLICT?

BY

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USAWC CLASS OF 2011

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing this collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. <b>PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.</b>					
1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 14-03-2011		2. REPORT TYPE Strategy Research Project		3. DATES COVERED (From - To)	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE  An Era of Persistent Conflict?				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)  Mr. William R. Gable				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)  Dr. William G. Pierce Department of Military Strategy, Planning, and Operations				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army War College 122 Forbes Avenue Carlisle, PA 17013				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Distribution A: Unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT Will the remainder of the first quarter of the twenty-first century be an era of persistent conflict for the United States? As the nation debates actions to take in response to the national debt crisis, the answer to this question will be fundamental in shaping military capabilities and defense budgets, and our national security. This paper explores whether existing theories of war support the assumption of persistent conflict. Three theorists are used as the basis for analyses and conclusions: Geoffrey Blainey, Stephen Van Evera, and Bernard Brodie. The paper examines the current operating environment and, using the work of the aforementioned theorists, tests the assumption of persistent conflict. The paper concludes there are specific circumstances where U.S. involvement in war is likely, and identifies the primary factors driving persistent conflict. These factors constitute areas where the U.S. government should focus all of elements of power to prevent what appears to be the inevitability of war.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Causes of war, factors leading to war					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT  UNLIMITED	18. NUMBER OF PAGES  36	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT UNCLASSIFIED	b. ABSTRACT UNCLASSIFIED	c. THIS PAGE UNCLASSIFIED			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code)



# USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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## **ABSTRACT**

AUTHOR: Mr. William R. Gable  
TITLE: An Era of Persistent Conflict?  
FORMAT: Strategy Research Project  
DATE: 14 March 2010 WORD COUNT: 6,788 PAGES: 36  
KEY TERMS: Causes of war, factors leading to war  
CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified

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## AN ERA OF PERSISTENT CONFLICT?

Will the remainder of the first quarter of the twenty-first century be an era of persistent conflict for the United States?

The United States faces numerous challenges and potential threats to its security. Non-state actors and rogue states working to acquire nuclear weapons differ dramatically from the enemy the United States confronted during the Cold War. China's rise also poses a challenge. Its "military buildup is a source of growing concern" for Pentagon officials.<sup>1</sup> Further, in the twenty-first century, analysts predict historic shifts in population demographics. Most of the expected population growth will occur in "today's poorest, youngest, and most heavily Muslim countries, which have a dangerous lack of quality education, capital, and employment opportunities."<sup>2</sup> The attacks on and since September 11, 2001 demonstrate that conditions in poor or failed states can provide sanctuary to those who threaten American security.<sup>3</sup>

These conditions seem to indicate that the prospects for armed conflict between now and 2025 are high. Indeed, military planners foresee a future full of threats, a period that Army Chief of Staff GEN George Casey describes as an "era of persistent conflict."<sup>4</sup> Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates has cautioned against assuming the "counterinsurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan are anomalies."<sup>5</sup>

As the nation debates actions to take in response to the national debt crisis, the question of whether the next ten to fifteen years will involve persistent conflict will take on greater significance. The answer to this question will be central in shaping the military's current and future force and basing structure, the programs that will receive funding, and the nature and extent of cuts in defense spending. If the answer is—as

some suggest—that “persistent conflict is unlikely because the U.S. can choose the conflicts in which it will engage,” the defense department can expect budget reductions to be significant.<sup>6</sup>

This paper will explore whether existing theories of war support this critical assumption that the remainder of the first quarter of the twenty-first century will be marked by persistent conflict. It will examine the current operating environment and theories from selected theorists on the causes of war. Using the work of these theorists, the paper will test the assumption of persistent conflict.

### The Current Environment

National strategic documents outline the key tenets that support the assumption of persistent conflict. The National Security Strategy signed by President Obama in May 2010, describes “a diverse array of challenges” ranging from non-state actors to rogue regimes and failed states.<sup>7</sup> The National Defense Strategy refines this environmental assessment, identifying three distinct challenges: violent extremists, regional powers armed with weapons of mass destruction, and rising regional powers. The strategy also identifies global trends as a factor that could cause or intensify problems.<sup>8</sup> A brief examination of these security challenges is necessary before discussing theories on the causes of war and testing the assumption under review.

*Violent Extremist Ideology.* The National Defense Strategy forecasts “a global struggle against a violent extremist ideology” for the “foreseeable future.”<sup>9</sup> These groups seek to overturn “the international state system,” taking advantage of “civil unrest and the conditions in failed states.”<sup>10</sup> The strategy describes this threat as “a long-term challenge to national security.”<sup>11</sup>

*Rogue States.* According to the National Defense Strategy “rogue states such as Iran and North Korea” also pose a great threat to international stability.<sup>12</sup> Both states are working to develop nuclear programs and North Korea is a major proliferator of nuclear and missile technology. Additionally, Iran is a key sponsor of terrorism in the Middle East.<sup>13</sup>

*Challenges from Powerful States.* The National Defense Strategy cautions that the United States must consider challenges posed by other powerful states.<sup>14</sup> Most prominent among these potential challengers are a rising China and a resurgent Russia.

As China’s economic strength grows, so too will its military strength. The National Defense Strategy calls for hedging “against China’s growing military modernization and the impact of its strategic choices upon international security.”<sup>15</sup> The strategy entails both bi-lateral military engagement and development of future U.S. capabilities. This strategy will mitigate short-term challenges while sustaining current military advantages in the long-term.<sup>16</sup>

Russia is increasingly attempting to regain its place as a global leader. According to the National Defense Strategy, this desire to reassert itself internationally raises security concerns for the U.S. and its partners in Europe.<sup>17</sup>

*Global Trends.* The National Defense Strategy warns that dramatic global trends will shape the next twenty years and potentially pose significant security challenges.<sup>18</sup> These trends include “physical pressures – population, resource, energy, climatic and environmental” combined with “rapid social, cultural, technological and geopolitical change.”<sup>19</sup> Other trends, such as globalization and economic interdependence create new opportunities and risks.<sup>20</sup> The strategy calls for consideration of these trends,

particularly demographic trends dealing with population growth in developing nations and the stagnating population growth in the western world.<sup>21</sup>

The next section discusses theories on the causes of war.

### Theories of War and a Methodology for this Analysis

Theories of war will serve as the basis for testing the assumption of persistent conflict. Three theorists are used as the basis for analyses and conclusions: Geoffrey Blainey, Stephen Van Evera, and Bernard Brodie. Below is a brief summary of their conclusions.

*Geoffrey Blainey.* Initially published in 1973, Geoffrey Blainey's *The Causes of War* is now in its third edition and has become one of the most widely quoted works dealing with the causes of war and peace.<sup>22</sup> Blainey evaluates past theories dealing with the causes of war, with a goal of using evidence to scrutinize each.<sup>23</sup>

Blainey asserts that "wars usually begin when two nations disagree on their relative strength, and wars usually cease when the fighting nations agree on their relative strength."<sup>24</sup> Thus, "anything," Blainey says, "which increases leaders' beliefs that they can forcibly impose their will on an enemy, and anything which increases the desire to impose their will, should be called a cause of war."<sup>25</sup> In assessing relative strength and deciding on war or peace, he argues there are "seven main factors:

- The personality and mental qualities of the leaders who weighed the evidence and decided for peace or war;
- Nationalism and ideology;
- Military strength and the ability to apply that strength efficiently in the chosen zone of war;

- Memory or forgetfulness of the realities and sufferings of war;
- Perceptions of internal unity and of the unity or discord of the enemy;
- Perceptions of prosperity and of ability to sustain, economically, the kind of war envisaged;
- And predictions of how outside nations would behave in the event of war.”<sup>26</sup>

He argues that each factor “can promote either peace or war,” with their combination deciding “the changes of peace and war.”<sup>27</sup> This paper will consider these criteria as a starting point.

*Stephen Van Evera.* In his 1999 work, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict*, Van Evera discusses the “vast literature” body of work that exists dealing with the causes of war.<sup>28</sup> More significantly, he tests several hypotheses (both his own and those of prior theorists), applying each in an attempt to explain history and thus confirm or refute the hypothesis each theory supports.<sup>29</sup> Van Evera’s rigorous methodology provides useful evidence for evaluating many of the factors Blainey uses to frame his arguments. Additionally, it provides two other factors to use in this analysis—the role of resources in causing war<sup>30</sup> (which will provide key evidence for evaluating global trends) and the “nuclear revolution.”<sup>31</sup>

*Bernard Brodie.* In addition to Blainey and Van Evera, this study makes limited references to noted war theorist Bernard Brodie. Like the initial edition of Blainey’s *The Causes of War*, Brodie’s *War and Politics* was first published in 1973. It, too, contains enduring lessons. In *War and Politics*, Brodie includes a lengthy examination of several disparate theories dealing with the causes of war, including those with psychological, political, and economic basis.<sup>32</sup> He also examines vital interests, those interests “that we

are ready to fight to preserve.”<sup>33</sup> Given that states presumably make war over matters of vital interest, an examination of this area is worthwhile—and Brodie’s discussion on this subject is quite useful. Therefore, this paper examines the impact of this factor separately.

To summarize, the work of these three theorists offer ten factors to use to test the assumption of persistent conflict. In evaluating the evidence presented by theorists or other relevant sources, the study extrapolates whether it supports or refutes the key assumption being studied—that the current and future era is one of persistent conflict. In discussing each factor, where possible, consideration is given to the three challenges the National Defense Strategy identifies: rogue states, non-state actors, and rising powers.<sup>34</sup> The time period for this analysis is the present through the year 2025.

One final note concerning methodology. Because the literature using theories dealing with the causes of war to examine the present and future era is virtually nonexistent, the paper periodically introduces the work of futurists Peter Schwartz and Andrew Krepinevich. Both rely on “scenario planning” to identify “predetermined elements,” which Schwartz describes as follows: “forces that we can anticipate with certainty, because we already see their early stages in the world today.”<sup>35</sup> This technique can be useful in illuminating the future. As Krepinevich explains: “If the future were *entirely* uncertain, scenario-based planning would be a waste of time. But certain things are predictable or at the least highly likely. While not quite ‘done deals,’ they are sufficiently well known that their probability of occurring is quite high.”<sup>36</sup>

## Testing the Assumptions

Using the ten factors gleaned from the theorists, this section tests the assumption of persistent conflict by examining each factor in detail.

*Individual Leaders.* Rogue states and non-state groups identified as threats in national security documents are led by exceptional leaders (exceptionally evil, many in the West would say). In that regard, is our era similar to the period from the late 1930s through 1945 when Hitler, Mussolini, and a group of Japanese militants caused worldwide outbreak of war?

Blainey believes that knowledge of individual leaders is vital to understanding the outbreak of war or peace. But he concludes such knowledge is speculation.<sup>37</sup> The inability to predict Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait illustrates this point. Thus, the intentions of Kim Jong Il of North Korea, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad or Iran's other revolutionary leaders, or China's current and future leaders cannot be known.

But, the intentions of non-state actors are clearer than Blainey concludes.

According to futurist Peter Schwartz, "there is no more certain way than terrorism for a group cut off from political power to get its point heard and expand its influence."<sup>38</sup> A key component of modern terrorism is a charismatic leader who clearly communicates his group's objectives. Thus, the presence of such leaders is one component of predicting future conflict.

For instance, according to Philip H. Gordon, Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri have made Al Qaeda's objectives clear: "drive the United States out of Muslim lands, topple the region's current rulers, and establish Islamic authority under a new caliphate."<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, other branches of Al Qaeda possess effective and charismatic leaders who have made their objectives clear. In January 2009, Saudi and Yemeni terrorist cells branches of Al-Qaeda formed Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).<sup>40</sup> Bin Laden's "understudy" and former private secretary, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, serves as the leader of AQAP.<sup>41</sup> The American-born cleric Anwar al-Awlaki has been described as a "powerful orator," his preaching causing great concern among U.S. counterterrorism officials.<sup>42</sup> The group's objectives include "targeting the U.S. homeland."<sup>43</sup> AQAP has been linked in some way to several recent operations aimed at or in the U.S., including the October 2010 attempt to destroy two cargo planes over the U.S.<sup>44</sup> AQAP and its leaders now appear to represent the greater security threat to the United States.

These exceptional individuals are key contributors to the turmoil we experienced in the last decade through the present, and their objectives could portend continued conflict. Their existence alone, though, does not necessarily assure conflict (and thus, confirm our assumption). The battle of ideas arising from the terrorists' ideology, and their power and capabilities warrant consideration before forming a conclusion.

*Intentions and Ideologies.* According to Christopher Layne, policymakers often rely on ideologies to predict their adversary's intentions.<sup>45</sup> Do the ideologies of rogue-states and non-state actors support our assumption of persistent conflict?

Blainey concludes that ideas do not cause war or maintain peace. In explaining his conclusions, Blainey cites historians who argued that "great ideas kept the peace."<sup>46</sup> These historians frequently cited the two lengthy periods of peace in the nineteenth century, attributing peace during these periods to cultural and intellectual factors that stifled man's instinct for war.<sup>47</sup>



But, according to Blainey, historians who concluded that ideas led to peace in the nineteenth century “cannot adequately explain why one period...was relatively peaceful and why another was studded with serious wars.”<sup>48</sup> He also cites shortcomings in the theorists’ ability to explain why civil wars continued in the nineteenth century. Thus, in Blainey’s opinion, ideas do not promote either peace or war.

Blainey maintains that “the idea that war is caused simply by a clash of aims is intrinsically satisfying” but not sufficient to act alone as a cause of war.<sup>49</sup> Differing aims—such as the desire to spread an ideology—are what Blainey terms “varieties of power.” While these cause tensions, they don’t necessarily cause wars.<sup>50</sup> Blainey’s theory is applicable to interstate conflict, explaining that ideas and ideologies don’t cause interstate wars or maintain peace between states.

However, again, the theory doesn’t seem applicable to non-state actors. Non-state actors may be defined by their ideology; it sustains every aspect of their organization, from recruiting to financing to inspiring operations. And ideology fueled by religion adds a dangerous dimension. Peter Schwartz describes it this way:

Religion is a much more difficult opponent in war than mere ideology. Ideology surrenders. But religion doesn’t work that way...to a religiously motivated group, like radical Islamicists, it is beside the point. ...they ask, ‘Which society is serving God?’ And when they go to war, they believe that they must persevere until the end. They will die for Allah because they see no difference between the will of God and the will of the religious state.<sup>51</sup>

Therefore, ideology seems to be a possible predictor of war with non-state actors. This supports the assumption of persistent conflict. But, leadership (discussed in the previous section) and intent also require capability. The next section addresses whether power and capabilities support or refute the assumption being studied.

*Power and Capabilities.* According to Blainey, many theories of war and peace focus on power. Some of theorists argue that when states get too powerful, they endanger peace. Therefore, a balance of power among nations is necessary to maintain peace. Conversely, a few theorists, like Clausewitz, Blainey says, argue that a dominant nation actually upholds peace.<sup>52</sup>

Blainey's conclusions are highly relevant to conflict between states. He dismisses theories based on balance of power, saying the theorists fail to provide sufficient evidence to support their theories. His analysis of major wars from 1700 to 1815 suggests instead that "a clear preponderance of power" promoted peace.<sup>53</sup> Years after four decisive wars—the Napoleonic war, the Franco-Prussian war, and the First and Second World Wars—he argues that the resulting imbalance of power resulted in "the most pronounced periods of peace" in Europe during the last 300 hundred years.<sup>54</sup>

If the end of wars produce "a neat ledger of power" as Blainey asserts, then the end of the Cold War clearly put the United States on the top of the ledger.<sup>55</sup> As Bernard Brodie emphasizes, "this country is so powerful...it is almost impossibly difficult to imagine any nation wishing to attack us within our own shores."<sup>56</sup> Based on Blainey's assertion, the United States current and continued preeminence (in the immediate future) as the world's only superpower would seem to diminish the potential for conflict.<sup>57</sup>

Even more important than actual power, according to Blainey, are perceptions of relative strength.<sup>58</sup> In that regard, it will be the outcome of America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—and whether the U.S. achieves its objectives—that will either reinforce its

preponderance of power or diminish it. In particular, the perceived outcome of these conflicts could deter or embolden rogue states.

In contrast, non-state actors aren't deterred by the United States' actual or perceived power. While Al Qaeda operations may have been disrupted after September 11, 2001, fear of retaliation will not preclude future attacks. Operations against the U.S. serve to enhance Al Qaeda's "status and power."<sup>59</sup>

Consequently, threats from non-state actors will continue. Depending on the potential destruction inflicted by any terrorist attack, the attacker's sanctuary, and the threat posed to the aforementioned governments, the U.S. may be compelled to fight wars similar to the war in Afghanistan.

Another element of power can influence the decision to go to war—fluctuations of power. According to Van Evera, "war is more likely when the relative power of states fluctuates sharply."<sup>60</sup> Specifically, "war is more likely when states expect better results from a war begun now than a war begun later."<sup>61</sup> These periods of changes in power are referred to as "windows."<sup>62</sup>

Van Evera observed that:

Windows are a potent cause of war. They create incentives for war and for war-risking belligerence by declining states. They also create offsetting incentives for peace among rising states. These peaceful incentives are not fully offsetting, however, because windows also impede peaceful cooperation to resolve conflict. Cooperation requires time for diplomacy, while windows impose haste. Cooperation is undercut by expectations of war, which windows create. Cooperation requires candid framing and discussion of goals and grievances, but windows foster concealment of grievances. Finally, once a power shift has occurred, the risen and fallen states often clash over the distribution of privileges.<sup>63</sup>

Van Evera points out that a variety of factors can impact a state's strength and thus create windows. Examples of factors he cites include economic and diplomatic.<sup>64</sup>

The relative decline of U.S. economic power in relation to China is a “window” or threat to peace. China’s economy continues to experience enormous growth and experts believe it will pass the U.S. as the world’s largest within 20 years, possibly even by the end of this decade.<sup>65</sup> China is also developing its military capabilities, as its testing of a stealth jet fighter in January 2011 showed.<sup>66</sup>

But the governments of both states recognize the threat this shift in power creates, and appear to be working to foster better relations and diffuse points of contention. In a January 2011 speech, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton pointed out that “history teaches us that the rise of new powers often ushers in periods of conflict and uncertainty,” but pointed to the need to foster better understanding to avoid conflict.<sup>67</sup> Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Cui Tiankai echoed these sentiments, also in a January speech.<sup>68</sup> Consequently, it appears both governments are aware of the risks and working to mitigate them. Thus, as it relates to China, the evidence that the factor power (or more specifically, “windows” theory) supports our assumption of persistent conflict appears inconclusive.

Iran’s nuclear program presents a potentially more ominous window. During his February 2011 testimony to the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, the Director of National Intelligence indicated that Iran is “keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons in part by developing various capabilities that better position it to produce such weapons, should it choose to do so.”<sup>69</sup> The implications of a nuclear-armed Iran are far-reaching. In a recent article in *Foreign Affairs* magazine, authors Eric S. Edelman, Andrew F. Krepinevich, and Evan Braden Montgomery appropriately described the consequences of a nuclear Iran as “grave.”<sup>70</sup> Should diplomacy,

sanctions, and cyber attacks fail to sidetrack Iran's nuclear program, the U.S. and Israel will be presented with an ever-narrowing window to act to potentially forcefully deny Iran this capability. As Van Evera explains in defining windows theory, an incentive for war exists. This evidence confirms the assumption of persistent conflict.

*Enthusiasm and War Weariness.* What role does enthusiasm or war weariness play in predicting future conflict? This section examines this question from the standpoint of the United States and how the U.S. population's viewpoint could influence the decision to wage war.

According to Blainey, the answer to this question is not simple. Enthusiasm for war or weariness caused by recent experiences in war can increase or decrease the likelihood of war. A state's decision on whether or not to fight (or continue fighting), he says, is based on its expected vision of war or peace, and the "fluctuating and intensely-coloured memory of past wars or past periods" influences this.<sup>71</sup> Blainey concludes, though, that "normally the outbreak of a major war becomes more likely as the last devastating war fades from personal memory."<sup>72</sup> Bernard Brodie's work supports these conclusions. Brodie believes "remembrance of things past is always an extremely important part of our present and of our expectations about the future."<sup>73</sup>

For the U.S., experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan tend to diminish enthusiasm for war. For example, according to Gallup Polls taken at the end of 2001 and in 2002, between 89 and 93 percent of Americans supported sending military forces to Afghanistan.<sup>74</sup> In November 2010, only 58 percent continued to support this decision.<sup>75</sup> This decline is striking when one considers the decision to send military forces to Afghanistan was in direct response to an attack on the U.S. homeland. Based on

lessons from the Korean War, Brodie predicted that the public's capacity to support a limited war would be precarious, especially if prolonged.<sup>76</sup> Thus the theories support the current mood and would seem to diminish the likelihood of conflict and undermine the assumption of a future marked by persistent conflict.

But, the populace's views can change rapidly. According to a Gallup poll done from 7 through 10 September 2001, "less than one-half of 1% of Americans mentioned terrorism as the nation's most important problem."<sup>77</sup> In response to a similar poll done in October 2001, 46 percent identified terrorism.<sup>78</sup> A terrorist attack, particularly one of considerable impact, would almost certainly affect the public enthusiasm for war.

Therefore, while the current mood may reflect war weariness, this factor's susceptibility to change diminishes its value in evaluating the assumption under review.

*Internal Unity and Discord.* According to Scapegoat theory, many wars have been heralded by serious unrest in one of the states that later went to war. The theory posits that leaders use this to focus aggression outward, providing a unifying distraction that enables the government to remain in power.<sup>79</sup> This theory appears applicable to leaders in rogue states like Iran and North Korea. Even Blainey states that, at first glance, the evidence seems to support the theory. As he explains, in 125 years, at least 31 wars (accounting for about half of the international wars) were preceded by internal friction in one of the later combatants.<sup>80</sup>

Blainey ends up dismissing the scapegoat theory.<sup>81</sup> He states that civil unrest was likely to lead to interstate war if it disrupted the accepted hierarchy of power, especially if unrest was in the stronger of two adversaries.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, this unrest was especially dangerous if there were strong ethnic or religious bonds that crossed state

borders. According to Blainey, of the civil disturbances which preceded international war from 1815 to 1939, at least 26 of 31 shared these characteristics.<sup>83</sup>

These conclusions are applicable to the current environment. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, conflict within states is now more common than between states, with most wars possessing a civil or ethnic component.<sup>84</sup> The attacks on and since September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 demonstrate that conditions in poor or failed states can threaten American and global security.<sup>85</sup> With global trends creating the potential for future failed states, this poses a significant threat.

Scenarios involving intrastate conflict leading to a wider war involving the United States are plausible. Futurist Peter Schwartz describes one such scenario combining internal conflict, fueled by the actions of a terrorist group:

If war does begin, it will start as localized, small-scale fighting among isolated groups...Only gradually will the local clashes draw national armies in. But if conflict reaches the level where terrorist acts become a commonplace weapon, it will mean world war, drawing in both the United States and even the orderly nations. Such a war is far more plausible to imagine now than it was before September 2001. Arguably, provoking that kind of war has been one of Al Qaeda's deliberate goals.<sup>86</sup>

When combined with the impact of global trends (discussed in a later section), it appears the combination of intrastate conflict and its potential to involve terrorism (including terrorism directed at the U.S. for supporting an ally) make conflict plausible. The recent revolution in Egypt and demonstrations in Jordan, Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Yemen appear to support this conclusion.

*Economics and War.* According to Blainey, a vital link exists between economics and wars.<sup>87</sup> Though not impossible, wars are less likely when economic conditions are poor.<sup>88</sup> Economic conditions affect both wealthy and non-wealthy states<sup>89</sup>

A key reason cited for this was how changes in economic mood impact leaders. As Blainey describes, “when trade is deteriorating and when unemployment is increasing the mood of governments tends to be cautious or apprehensive. On the other hand, when prosperity is high—and this is the time most dangerous to peace—there comes a sense of mastery of the environment.”<sup>90</sup>

The theory appears valid and relevant today. Economic conditions do affect U.S. leaders’ decision-making. The current concern over the national debt will dampen leaders’ enthusiasm for wars. Even the nation’s principal military advisor, Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recently referred to national debt as “the single biggest threat to our national security.”<sup>91</sup> While during the period of the next fifteen years, the emphasis on the debt may fade and economic conditions may improve, it will be years before U.S. leaders will see themselves as masters of the economic environment.

But, as Brodie cautions, war is still possible during an economic downturn.<sup>92</sup> The U.S. has sustained two wars since 2008, the start of the current economic downturn. Also, the current administration appears committed to keeping a significant troop presence in Afghanistan through 2014.<sup>93</sup> In fact, during a recent visit to Afghanistan, Vice President Joe Biden indicated the United States’ willingness to provide support, including troops, to Afghanistan beyond 2014, if that state’s people want it.<sup>94</sup>

Moreover, some theorize that economic conditions could actually *spur* conflict. For instance, in one of the scenarios that Andrew Krepinevich prepared in 1991 while working in the Pentagon (and later published in his book *7 Deadly Scenarios: A Military Futurist Explores War in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*), a nuclear-armed Iran takes aggressive



actions to ensure economic growth and political stability. These actions involve blocking the Strait of Hormuz and mining the Persian Gulf. Before permitting oil to flow freely from the Gulf, Iran demands the U.S. remove all troops from the Middle East, Saudi Arabia reduce oil and gas output, and all states pay a fee for their tankers to use the Straits.<sup>95</sup>

Finally, existing theories fail to consider non-state actors and how economic conditions affect their actions. One could postulate that the attempted attacks by AQAP, in this period of economic downturn, indicate non-state actors are insulated (or more insulated) from global or regional economic conditions.

Consequently, while economic conditions may influence the actions of a state's leaders at a given point in time, the impact is not definitive. Therefore, insufficient evidence exists to support or refute the assumption of persistent conflict.

*Expectations.* According to Blainey, “expectations—and particularly expectations in the short term—seem a crucial clue to the causes of war and peace.”<sup>96</sup>

To illustrate, Blainey describes the optimism that preceded the First World War. While most saw this as “an exceptional mood,” Blainey concludes that it was not exceptional but more noticeable.<sup>97</sup> While not present before every war, Blainey describes the number of wars started with the same “high expectations” as “startlingly long” and concludes this factor is “a vital prelude to war.”<sup>98</sup>

Van Evera's analyses support this conclusion. A key hypothesis Van Evera tested was that “war is more likely when states fall prey to false optimism about its outcome.”<sup>99</sup> He concludes that “at least some false optimism about relative power preceded every major war since 1740, as well as many less and ancient wars.”<sup>100</sup>

Moreover, he identifies another key factor contributing to illusions of easy victory—states commonly underestimate their adversary’s will.<sup>101</sup> Accordingly, Van Evera concludes “false optimism is a potent and pervasive cause of war.”<sup>102</sup>

Equally important, before choosing war as an option, political and military leaders should consider the nature of the potential war. According to Clausewitz, this was the first and most important strategic judgment.<sup>103</sup> This consideration is especially important in the twenty-first century because intrastate conflicts often involve guerilla warfare in whole or part. In wars with potential adversaries—such as North Korea, Iran, or a state serving as a terrorist sanctuary, like Yemen, the United States could bring overwhelming force to bear. Yet, these wars would eventually descend into irregular warfare. Our national leaders’ appetite for this type of conflict is undoubtedly small.

Blainey summarized it well: “If two nations are deep in disagreement on a vital issue, and ...they expect victory to come only after long fighting, then war is unlikely.”<sup>104</sup> Using this as our criteria, the factor of expectations does not support the assumption of persistent conflict.

One final point on expectations. Blainey pointed out that “nations which entered a war reluctantly...were more inclined to believe that they were embarking on a long struggle.”<sup>105</sup> This is an important consideration. For the United States, the war against Al Qaeda and other Islamic extremists is defensive in nature. The nature of the conflict and the lack of a well-defined end point appear to be factors contributing to the assumption that this will be a “longterm” struggle.<sup>106</sup> These perceptions undoubtedly influence national and military leaders, thereby, contributing to the pessimistic assumption of persistent conflict.

*Globalization.* The world is more connected than at any point during its history. While some argue that globalization causes or promotes peace (reference), Blainey dismisses theories that attribute periods of peace or war to the growing interconnectedness of the world. Here again, he examines the nineteenth century and theorists who attributed periods of peace to global interconnectivity. These theorists forecasted long periods of peace lasting into the twentieth century. But, Blainey believes globalization didn't cause peace. Instead, it was mostly the result of peace, saying the free flow of goods and ideas "was very much an effect of peace though in turn the flow may have aided peace."<sup>107</sup>

Stephen Van Evera examines this phenomena more closely through the lens of resources. Van Evera concludes war is more probable when resources are cumulative (that is, when "its possession helps its possessor to protect or acquire other resources.")<sup>108</sup> Cumulativity of resources causes states to "more fiercely defend what they have, seek more for themselves, and seek to prevent others from gaining more."<sup>109</sup> In his opinion, this inhibits cooperation and creates flash points that could trigger wars. As supporting evidence, he cites the how the cumulativity of resources was one of the reasons that drove German and Japanese expansion during the 1930s.<sup>110</sup> They sought food and energy resources.<sup>111</sup> Both states, Van Evera says, thought their "economy could be strangled by an enemy blockade unless it achieved economic independence."<sup>112</sup> This led both to adopt expansionist policies to achieve "economic independence."<sup>113</sup>

But the degree of cumulativity may have changed since that time period. Van Evera cites seven developments that "have reduced the cumulativity of many resources

over the past few decades.<sup>114</sup> Among them are “the nuclear revolution,” the appearance of “knowledge-based economies,” and the “increasing flexibility of modern industrial economies.”<sup>115</sup> The latter development, he contends, allows states to adapt during economic emergencies. Even OPEC’s power is limited, he claims.<sup>116</sup> Revived nationalism and the availability of weapons are developments Van Evera believes inhibit aggression by increasing the possibility of resistance and the cost of occupation.<sup>117</sup> The international community’s collective response to aggression discourages aggressors from seeking resource advantages.<sup>118</sup>

While addressing resources, Van Evera (and, for that matter, the other theorists examined) does not address newer trends, such as demographic change or climate change.

Overall, it’s difficult to judge whether the trends associated with globalism will cause or contribute to persistent conflict. On one hand, the trends seem to diminish the likelihood of war for those states able to garner the benefits of globalization. On the other hand, the trends seem to foreshadow instability and intrastate conflict, promoting the conditions that serve as an incubator for terrorist organizations to grow. The latter seems to indicate continued conflict ahead.

*Vital Interests.* According to Bernard Brodie, Americans expect wars to be rare and occur only as a result of “impelling need, and then only for political ends that are reasonably consistent with its (our) basic political philosophy.”<sup>119</sup> While individuals may differ in their political beliefs, according to Brodie, there is wide agreement on a “few principles,” such as the justification of fighting a war for “survival.”<sup>120</sup> Thus, it would seem possible to glean vital interests from these principles. Moreover, by comparing these

interests to the vital interests of other states, potential areas of conflict should be readily identifiable.

In *War and Politics*, Brodie provides a definition that can serve as a potential guidepost: “those issues in our *foreign* affairs that are thought to affect the survival or security of the nation, meaning specifically security against military attack.”<sup>121</sup> It should be noted that Brodie’s definition doesn’t preclude the use of military force to aid an ally or act preemptively to impede an imminent threat. Brodie considered these things part of a superpower’s responsibility, justifying strategies such as containment to deal with indirect threats to survival or security. The explicit focus on survival and security seemingly narrows the number of instances when war becomes the first or primary option.

Unfortunately, vital interests can be ambiguous. As Brodie explains, they have “only a vague connection with objective fact.”<sup>122</sup> In determining vital interests, he believes leaders are “highly fallible and inevitably biased,” often using “commonly accepted axioms.”<sup>123</sup> Such axioms, he points out, frequently “outlive whatever usefulness they once had.”<sup>124</sup> According to Brodie, “where war is concerned we are usually guided by faith, tradition, and passion.”<sup>125</sup>

Therefore, an analysis of U.S vital interests in comparison to vital interests of other nations may not necessarily illuminate future friction points or help us predict the likelihood of future war. Accordingly, we can’t rely on vital interests to test the assumption of persistent conflict.

*Nuclear Proliferation.* The National Security Strategy identifies possession of nuclear weapons by rogue states or violent extremists, as the greatest threat to American security.<sup>126</sup>

Stephen Van Evera analyzes the various potential futures, including one involving different states and non-state actors possessing nuclear weapons.<sup>127</sup> He concludes that the “effects” of mutually assured destruction (MAD) vary according to the nature of the states possessing nuclear weapons. MAD “strengthens peace” when states are “detrable.”<sup>128</sup> That is, states are dissuaded by the costs of a nuclear exchange, “perceive the world well enough to know when others plan to impose costs,” and “value conquests less than others value their independence.”<sup>129</sup> According to Van Evera, a “MAD world of deterrable states...is profoundly peaceful.”<sup>130</sup> These conclusions suggest it’s unlikely the United States will go to war with near-peer competitors such as China or Russia.

Conversely, Van Evera concludes a MAD world of nondetrable states is extremely dangerous. He describes nondetrable states as states that, “in some combination are insensitive to costs, misperceive other states’ motives and intentions, and highly value new conquests.”<sup>131</sup> These states, he explains, “are unresponsive to threats of punishment because they do not feel the pain of punishment, or they are willing to take great pain to gain their goals, or they fail to see the punishment coming. Hence they are hard to deter.”<sup>132</sup> Van Evera concludes that these types of states could exist in the future, citing irrational regimes that have acted without regard to the adverse consequences heaped on their people. Writing in 1999, he holds up Saddam Hussein to

illustrate how leaders can “badly misperceive the realities they face.”<sup>133</sup> His description could easily fit a nuclear-armed North Korea or Iran.

Van Evera also concludes that peaceful states with nuclear weapons and strong conventional defense forces would be “at the mercy” of nondeterrable states.<sup>134</sup> He predicts that nondeterrable states could start a war or the peaceful states could act preemptively.<sup>135</sup> His conclusions strongly suggest the United States will fight future wars with North Korea or Iran. Considering Van Evera’s conclusions on nondeterrable states and the discussion of “Windows Theory” in the previous section, these wars will most likely be preemptive, with the United States leading coalitions in an attempt to prevent these rogue nations from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Unfortunately, Van Evera’s discussion of non-state actors possessing nuclear weapons reinforces the likelihood of future war. Nuclear proliferation raises the possibility that non-state actors could acquire nuclear weapons. Such actors are “less deterrable because they have no fixed homeland or population that could be held hostage for their good behavior.”<sup>136</sup> Moreover, terrorists with sanctuary in ungoverned spaces in weak or failed states would pose an even greater deterrence challenge.<sup>137</sup>

Van Evera’s conclusions are compelling and suggest that attempts by North Korea and Iran to develop their nuclear weapons and acquire and possibly proliferate weapons, combined with the potential threat posed by a non-state actor acquiring such weapons, form conditions that indicate a strong possibility of war. This supports the assumption that the period from now through 2025 will be one of persistent conflict.

## Conclusion

As Geoffrey Blainey explains, the combination of factors discussed in this paper will determine whether the remainder of the first quarter of this century will be one of persistent conflict. Many of the ten factors that contribute to war point to persistent conflict continuing.

Exceptional individuals are key contributors to the turmoil the U.S. experienced in the last decade through the present, and their objectives could portend continued conflict. While the existence of these exceptional individuals alone does not necessarily assure conflict, the ideologies they espouse are underpinned by religion adding a non-deterrable dimension to their struggle. The actual or perceived preponderance of U.S. power will not diminish the likelihood of future attacks. In fact, such attacks will only serve to enhance these organizations' status and power, fueling every aspect of their operations from recruiting to financing operations. Consequently, threats from non-state actors will continue. Depending on the potential destruction inflicted by any terrorist attack, the attacker's sanctuary, and the threat posed to the aforementioned governments, the U.S. may be compelled to fight wars similar to the war in Afghanistan.

Conflict with another state is possible, though less likely. Although the relative decline of U.S. economic power in relation to China appears to constitute a potential "window" or threat to peace, both governments are aware of the risks and are working to mitigate them. Moreover, the U.S., China, and Russia represent deterrable nuclear powers, states dissuaded from conflict with each other due to the potential costs of a nuclear exchange. Conflict between these states appears unlikely.



However, existing theory suggests problems with nondeterrable states that are not responsive to punishment or are willing to take risks that prompt conflict. North Korea and Iran seem to fit this description. Their efforts to develop, acquire, and possibly proliferate nuclear weapons, combined with the potential threat posed by a non-state actor acquiring such weapons, form conditions that indicate a strong possibility of war. In particular, Iran's nuclear program presents a potentially ominous window. Should diplomacy, sanctions, and cyber attacks fail to sidetrack Iran's nuclear program, the U.S. will be presented with an ever-narrowing window to act with force to deny Iran this capability. This could result in conflict with Iran.

While false optimism is a potent and pervasive cause of war, recent experience with war and the nature of these and likely future conflicts will diminish leaders support for initiating war. Similarly, the current economic conditions and concern over the national debt will dampen leaders' enthusiasm for wars. But existing theories that discuss these factors fail to consider the impact of non-state actors. Thus, conflict is still possible despite them.

Overall, the combination of factors seems to indicate continuing conflict with non-state actors and potential conflict with states over development and proliferation of nuclear weapons. These factors identify specific circumstances where U.S. involvement in war is likely, and represent the primary drivers for concluding that the current era will be one of persistent conflict. The U.S. government should use all of the elements of power to focus on these factors to prevent what history and theory suggest the inevitability of war.

## Endnotes

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 1.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

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- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., 123. The bullets were re-ordered for presentation purposes.
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- <sup>34</sup> Gates, 1.
- <sup>35</sup> Peter Schwartz, *Inevitable Surprises: Thinking Ahead in a Time of Turbulence* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, June 2004), 135; Andrew F. Krepinevich, *7 Deadly Scenarios: A Military Futurist Explores War in the 21st Century* (New York, NY: Bantam Dell, February 2009), 14.
- <sup>36</sup> Krepinevich, 14 (emphasis in original).
- <sup>37</sup> Blainey, 13.
- <sup>38</sup> Schwartz, 135.
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<sup>44</sup> Center for Strategic and International Studies, "Critical Questions: AQAP in Yemen," November 5, 2010, <http://csis.org/publication/aqap-yemen>, (accessed November 12, 2010). The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) is a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. The information presented on the website was gathered from an interview of Jon Alterman, director of the Middle East Program at CSIS, and Rick "Ozzie" Nelson, director of the CSIS Homeland Security and Counterterrorism Program.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>51</sup> Schwartz, 137-139.

<sup>52</sup> Blainey, 109.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Brodie, 345.

<sup>57</sup> Blainey, 67.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>59</sup> Schwartz, 132-133.

<sup>60</sup> Van Evera, 260.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 73.

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<sup>74</sup> Jeffrey M. Jones, "Americans Less Pessimistic about Progress in Afghanistan: Forty-Five Percent Say Things Are Going Well for the U.S. in Afghanistan," Gallup, November 29, 2010, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/144944/Americans-Less-Pessimistic-Progress-Afghanistan.aspx> (accessed January 18, 2011). The specific polling question was: Thinking now about U.S. military action in Afghanistan that began in October 2001, do you think the United States made a mistake in sending military forces to Afghanistan or not?

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 80-81.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 82.

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Schwartz, 147-148.

<sup>87</sup> Blainey, 11.

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<sup>91</sup> Gordon Adams and Matthew Leatherman, "A Leaner and Meaner Defense: How to Cut the Pentagon's Budget While Improving Its Performance," *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 90, no. 1 (January/February 2011), 140.

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 25.

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